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The Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Colored Regiment. Harper's Weekly.

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witnessed the Gullahs' spiritual enthusiasm at these meetings. She noticed an old blind man, Maurice, who led the singing with a remarkable voice, and sang with special forcefulness the favorite "New Jerusalem." According to Forten, his voice rang out "a glad, triumphal sound," but Maurice's story was a tragic one:

> His blindness was caused by a blow on the head from a loaded whip. He was struck by his master in a fit of anger. "I feel great distress when I become blind," said Maurice; "but den I went to seek de Lord; and ebber since I know I see in de next world, I always hab great satisfaction."[8]

Undoubtedly the pathos was eased somewhat by the Gullahs' rationalization that no matter how painful life was, someone had endured more than they, by their belief in the efficacy of salvation, and their expectation of immortality. Also, a great source of sustenance and faith in themselves derived from the Gullahs' presumption that they, like Christ, were historically guiltless. Gullahs reportedly possessed a "piety" of the heart. And they displayed an intuitive knowledge of the moral teachings of Christianity based upon practical experience, the socioreligious influence of African religion, and their own sense of collective survival.

Northern missionaries and teachers were impressed with how much Gullah religious expressions "sparkle with rich genius." Their belief in the noble nature of their circumstances helped to inspire creative inclinations. Gullahs called themselves a "peculiar people," and the words of an old Baptist deacon, recorded by Laura Towne, poignantly illustrate their communal spirituality. After planters deserted the Islands, Gullahs were compelled by Yankees to continue working in the cotton fields, often for little or nothing. Bondspeople wanted to cultivate provisions for their families, and just as the Gullahs were beginning to trust some white Northerners, another calamity befell them. In May 1862, Gullah men were, at bayonet point, conscripted into the Union Army by General David Hunter. The Gullahs feared the worse, that as their masters had warned, they were being sent to Cuba. All gathered together before the men were herded off. Fathers took children in their arms. Women gave way to expressions of grief that touched the hearts of the strongest observers of the scene. According to Towne, this was an exceedingly low point for the Gullahs, who had already withstood so much:

> We, anxious and depressed, talked in low tones over this extra ordinary proceeding. . . . That evening we ladies went to the praise house and heard good, old Marcus exhort, Dagus pray and all sing. Marcus said he had often told all the

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World perception. Anthropologist Paul Radin has written that the Christian God provided African-American slaves with a "fixed point," and that they converted God to themselves.[11] Of the Gullahs at least it might also be more aptly stated that they converted Christianity to their African world view. Gullahs used religion as a justification to combat objective forces, to collectively perpetuate a rich sublimity in cultural form, and as a spiritually liberating ideology. It was not so much that Christianity instilled a sense of resignation because of belief in future rewards, though admittedly for some this was a determining factor, but that an African philosophical tradition was asserted in the slave quarters.[12]

For slaves, acceptance of Christianity did not imply negation of earthly life. The supreme example of this was their desire for liberty. Freedom was a continuous topic of conversation among them. Robert Smalls, who grew up in antebellum Beaufort, remembered that as a boy he first heard of Frederick Douglass in the slave quarters of one of his owner's Ladies Island plantations. Three people in the slave quarters could read and every scrap of printed matter was given to them to translate. One of the literates, a recent arrival from Charleston, secured a copy of one of Douglass's speeches and read it to the slaves. Between the three literate field hands, the bondspeople of the McKee plantations kept abreast of the "politicking" over slavery. An old slave woman of Edisto Island told Northerner Mary Ames, "I heard for a long time of war and the coming of the Yankees, and I spects my bones be white before I see that time, but I did live to see them, bress de Lord." On one of the St. Helena Island plantations, a black carpenter held a secret night school for the men during bondage.[13] Thus did the Gullahs attempt to apprise themselves of events affecting their future.

The most obvious testament of the Gullahs' will to freedom is their participation in the Civil War, once it became a liberation struuggle. In May 1862, when General Hunter drafted the men without authorization, there was no desire to fight. The Gullah men, having "smelt a very large rat," took to the woods to "split rails,"but were soon rounded up. They were taken to Hilton Head, drilled, kept until after the harvest, placing an extreme hardship on their families, then discharged without pay or freedom. Thus, in the fall of 1862, when the authorized draft was called, with the provision for emancipation, many hesitated. The memories of the previous impressment were still fresh, and "weakened their confidence" in "promises for the future." Enlistments were slow at first. But

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the pledge of freedom won them over, and by January 1863, formation of the "First Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers" was complete.[14]

Many whites either doubted the African-American slaves' capacity to fight the slaveholders, feared the consequences of an armed black population, or simply expressed racialist convictions in their attitude. But exigencies of war turned slaves into liberators, and black soldiers demonstrated what freedom meant to people in bondage. The "enthusiasm," "alarcrity," and sense of duty among men of the "First South" was reportedly unmatched. Rather than fearful, they were impatient to fight. Their commander, Colonel Higginson, insisted that "braver men never lived." Accustomed to bearing pain, some did not even report injuries after battles. Frequently susceptible to pulmonary disease, some refused to report to sick call unless their officers insisted. Gullah soldiers fought all the more fiercely because of a particular grievance. Blacks were not recognized as soldiers by Confederates, but as fugitive slaves. Thus black soldiers and their white officers fought "with ropes around our necks." Confederates ordered that, if captured, blacks and their officers would suffer a "felon's death." Gullahs were especially sullen when North and South raised truce flags, saluted each other "courteously," exchanged cigars, and negotiated "usually to send over to the enemy, some family of Rebel women." While showing no disrespect in word or deed, according to Higginson, the blacks hated these women "from the botton of their souls." "Deres no flags ob truce for us," said the Gullahs, contemptuous of such proceedings, "When de Secesh fight de Fus' Souf', he fight in earnest." But Gullahs also fought in earnest. In the words of Sergeant Prince Rivers, former Beaufort slave and coachman, they could, as "men, look our old masters in de face." "Now," he said, "we ain't afraid, if they meet us, to run the bayonet through them."[15]

In their frequent prayer meetings, Gullah soldiers prayed for victory, mixing "the warlike" with "the pious." They spoke of "a religious army," and a "gospel army." According to Higginson they even "evangelized" the chaplin, who previously was "rather heretic." Higginson found that their "faith," "love of freedom and of their families," together with their sense of pride, combined to "make them do their duty." They were confident in the rightness of their cause and that "God would watch over them." Their religious leaders encouragingly assured them that eternity awaited the fallen hero. When the "First South" prepared for an expe-

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dition to Florida, one of the black preacher's exhortations was reportedly "worthy of a place in 'American Oratory.'" He urged the men to seek the post of danger and fight bravely. "He who is de fust man to get on de boat," he rallied, "and de fust to jump on shore, him, if he fall, will be de fust to get in heaben." Then, as if himself in the midst of battle, and aroused by the occasion, he added fervently:

> 'An' when do battle comes—when you see de Kunn'l put his shoulder to de wheel, and hear de shot and shell flying all around like de rain drops, den remember dat ebery one ob dose shot is a bolt of de Almighty God to send dem rebels to deir eberlasting damnation.[16]

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Sacrifices for freedom were not only made by Gullah soldiers, for the war effort was a community enterprise. The men's absence from the plantations placed the burden of breadwinning solely on the women, who shouldered it admirably. Gullah men had at first objected to the women working in the fields because this labor had taken such a heavy toll on female health. But women insisted on working "fur pay," and did so "with a will," sometimes working two tasks in one day. Thus, while the men went off to fight or to work as laborers for the army, field work continued. Women, boys, and girls worked side by side, planting, hoeing, picking, sorting, ginning, and packing the cotton. They also raised vegetables and poultry for consumption and to sell. The women were ambitious and disciplined, laboring with "tireless energy" when working for themselves and their families. Sometimes they even managed to attend newly established schools in order to "catch a lesson." As a way of further supporting loved ones away with the regiment and the army, the women wrote letters. Many of the Northern women's "spare time" was spent writing words of love and encouragement dictated by the freedwomen.[17] It was a period of optimism, when social relations knitted over generations proved tenacious and steady. This was also a time when the faith of the bondspeople seemed to bear fruit.

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The subject of freedom was often symbolically and thematically expressed in Gullah spirituals. While these "prayer songs" appear to be a portent of the future in a Christian context, they contain ambiguity that implies otherwise. Double meanings and surrogates abounded, and Gullah spirituals could often be interpreted in several ways. For example:

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Jesus make de blind see,
Jesus make de cripple walk,
Jesus make de deaf to hear.
Walk in, kind Jesus!
No man can hinder me.[19]

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When Laura Towne heard this impressive spiritual, she believed the refrain "no man can hinder me" meant that "nothing could prevent access to Jesus." Yet Charles Nordhoff, a journalist sent to Port Royal in 1863 to write about Sea Islanders, heard the song and immediately attributed it to "an aspiration for liberty."[19] Certainly there were elements of truth in both interpretations—a combination of mystical belief in the miraculous powers of the Christian God and a deep, sense of freedom—a heritage from the African past. Higginson heard Gullah soldiers sing the song and noted that they sometimes substituted "hinder me" with "hinder we." But he failed to attach any significance to this, merely stating that it was "more spicy to the ear, and more in keeping with the usual head-over-heels arrangement of their pronouns." Despite the perception and usefulness of Higginson's book, it also contains a disturbing air of condescension toward the Gullahs which was typical of some abolitionists. Although he attested to the Gullahs' daring and coolness in combat, thus affirming their equality with whites in terms of courage, he failed to credit them with having any intellectual complexity in their modes of expression. He recognized Gullah soldiers' physical strength but overlooked aspects of their character which bespoke of higher emotions, unless these could be interpreted in a strictly Christian sense. Hence Higginson viewed the Gullahs' songs as "thoroughly religious," and the attitudes contained in them as "always the same, and, as a commentary on the life of the race, . . . infinitely pathetic. Nothing but patience for this life,—nothing but triumph in the next."[20]

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Gullahs were a proud people who did not indulge in self-pity and would have resented being seen in a piteous light by their friend and supporter. Life for the Gullahs was an uphill battle but not without grace and nobility. Higginson sometimes failed to grasp this, despite his close relationship with Gullah soldiers and their families. One can imagine the thoughts of Gullah soldiers as they sang and contemplated that their treasured expectation was becoming a reality. Substitution of "we" for "me," possibly represented feelings of nationalism which had developed over a period of generations when social and cultural traditions

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164–66; Edwin S. Williams to Rev. S. S. Jocelyn, January 28, 1863, AMA. For an interesting discussion of the fusion of Old and New Testament figures, see Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 252–55.

7 George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols., *South Carolina Narratives*, vols. 2 & 3, in 4 parts (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing, 1972), II (2) 180–81.

8. Charlotte Forten, "Life on the Sea Islands," Part II, *Atlantic Monthly* 13 (June, 1864): 672.

9. Mansfield French to Revs. Whipple and Jocelyn, n.d., AMA; Ira Berlin, ed., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, Series II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 49–50; Allen Diary, 57–58; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 145–48; Diary of Laura M. Towne, 26, Penn School Papers, SHC. It is interesting to note that "Old Marcus' " "Massa" was Daniel Pope of the Oaks Plantation. Pope was an important individual in St. Helena's Baptist Church. The Oaks was one of the plantations where Northerners saw so many signs of "ill-treatment," and was referred to as "de cruelest place." Towne Diary, 32–33.

10. Arthur Sumner to Lt. Joseph Clark, January 23, 1863, Penn School Papers, vol. 4 SHC: Botume, *Amongst the Contrabands*, 218; Higginson, *Army Life*, 231–39.

11. Paul Radin, "Status, Phantasy, and the Christian Dogma," in Clifton Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville: Social Science Institute, Fisk University, 1945), Foreword, i–ix.

12. There is much that is interesting and convincing in Radin's analysis of slave religion. But he does not take into account fully, the effects of slave religion on social cohesion in the quarters. Radin ignores the cultural and communal components of slave religion—its most progressive elements. He apparently views slave religion in mainly Christian terms, referring to the slaves' "sin" and desire for cleanliness and rebirth. The self-doubt and vacillation which he maintains the Christian conversion experience dispelled represents an analysis of the role of Christianity only on one level. It does not take full cognizance of other influences on the development of black religion. Perhaps Radin attributes too much to Christianity, and views the slaves' perception of Christianity too simply. The Gullahs' conception of sin differed from that which the masters attempted to instill. The slaves looked beyond the concept of a personal God, an "other world," a "rebirth," and beyond an attitude toward sin that worked against their interests. We agree with Radin that religion helped the slaves escape "demoralization" and "neurosis." Radin credits this "escape" from the degrading features of enslavement to Christianity. But communal and cultural development also provided that extra layer of faith. His interpretation of the psychological features and effects of the conversion experience would be even more insightful if a broader approach to slave religion were taken. Ibid.

13. John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 377; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 132; Dorothy Sterling, *Captain of the Planter: The Story of Robert Smalls*, (New York: Doubleday, 1958) 32–33; Ames, *Dixie Diary*, 45; Towne Diary, passim. Northern teachers related that the Gullahs sometimes found ways to gain some literacy during slavery. Two house servants "picked it up from their master's children," letter by letter. Several other people learned from hymn books. Some were never taught but picked up letters "here and there," which enabled them to read "easy sentences." Allen Diary, 62.

14. Berlin, *Freedom: Black Military Experience*, 46–54; Allen Diary, 155; Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 68–70, 75–76, 93–97; Higginson, *Army Life*, 39–40.

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15. Berlin, *Freedom: Black Military Experience*, 54–55; Higginson, *Army Life*, 63, 72, 86–105, 149–50; H. G. Spaulding, "Under the Palmetto," *Continental Monthly* 4 (August, 1963): 202–3; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 64, 87–93.

16. Higginson, *Army Life*, 46–48, 70–71, 240–41; Spaulding, "Under the Palmetto," 196.

17. Allen Diary, 82–83; Pearson, *Port Royal*, 99, n. 1, 102, 114, 181–82; Charles Nordhoff, "The Freedmen of South Carolina," in Frank Moore, ed., *Papers of the Day* (New York: C. T. Evans, 1863), 4–5; Towne Diary, 14, 21; Botume, *Amongst the Contrabands*, 143–56.

18. Forten, "Sea Islands, Part I, 588.

19. Rupert Holland, ed. *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969, Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1912), 26.

20. Higginson, *Army Life*, 192; Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New York: Atheneum, 1970; repr. from 1968 ed.) 257–60.

21. Botume, *Amongst the Contrabands*, 204; Forten, "Sea Islands," Part II, 672; Allen Diary, 164.

22. Botume, *Amongst the Contrabands*, 204.

23. Higginson, *Army Life*, 208.

24. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, 257–60 For an enlightening and provoking treatment of "romantic racialism" see George M. Frederickson, *Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), Chapter 4; William Francis Allen, Charles P. Ware, and Lucy M. Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: Peter Smith, 1951; repr. from 1867 ed.), 48; Higginson, *Army Life*, 208–9.

25. Rev. Mansfied French to Revs, Whipple and Jocelyn, n. d., AMA.

26. Higginson, *Army Life*, 235.

27. Ibid., 71, 236–38, and his Appendix D, 267–76.

28. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 457.

9. Folk Religion in the Slave Quarters

1. Mrs. William R. Wister, "Recollections of a Southern Plantation and School," Penn School Papers, vol. 5, 19, SHC; Rosa B. Cooley, *School Acres*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 148–49; Diary of Laura M. Towne, 52, Penn School Papers, SHC; "The Long Look," 2–3, undated sketch of a former slave, Sam Polite, who lived to be over 100 years old, Penn School Papers, vol. 1, SHC.

2. *Minutes, Beaufort Baptist Church*, November 11, 1840 and January 7, 1842, 12; October 7, 1859, 271–74, BC; James H. Cuthbert, *Life of Richard Fuller* (New York: Sheldon Co., 1879), 104–5.

3. Cooley, *School Acres*, 148–49; Towne Diary, 52, Samuel Lawton, "The Religious Life of Coastal and Sea Island Negroes," (Ph.D. dissertation, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1939), 61, 69–72; William F. Allen et al., *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: Peter Smith, 1951; repr. from 1867 ed.) xviii.

4. Thomas J. Woofter, *Black Yeomanry* (New York: Henry Hold, 1930), 243–54; Towne Diary 26, 42; Charlotte Forten, "Life on the Sea Islands," Part II, *Atlantic Monthly* 13 (June, 1864): 672; Edward L. Pierce, "The Negroes at Port Royal, S. C.," Doc. 51 in *Rebellion Record*, ed. Frank Moore, Suppl. 1 (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1871) 305; Lawton, "Religious Life," 54–57, 60–62; Patricia Guthrie, "Catching Sense: The Meaning